Our Country Lives: Rethinking the Museum of English Rural Life

11 February 2019
Why we needed to change

- Galleries designed for large objects, most smaller objects inaccessible
- Content increasingly inaccessible and hard for the majority of visitors, particularly younger age groups, to understand
- Visitor satisfaction ratings were high, but what visitors learned from the galleries was less clear
- Cycle of events and activities rather than core content was increasingly the driver for building visit numbers – this was unsustainable
What audience research told us

- Narrow demographics of those visiting - failure to reach and relate to diversity of Reading communities
- Limited content and stories relevant and relatable to local urban and diverse audiences, particularly young people
- Short dwell time
- In-gallery interpretation limited and inflexible
Manifesto

Our museum was established to record the disappearance of a rural way of life in order to understand and learn from the past. We now renew this as our cause, committing the museum and its resources to fostering encounters and experiences that change perceptions about the future of the countryside.

We will sustain a link with the skills and cultures of the rural past. These are the basis for debate about global sustainability and the importance of place. Our affective museum experiences will connect people with their personal histories and identities, improving well being and an appreciation of the history and future of food and the countryside.

We strive to be relevant to all people and to the widest range of stakeholders. We will support everyone to engage with our collections, expertise and knowledge; we will offer and deliver opportunities for participation that empower and inspire learning and deepen engagement with today's environment.

We are pioneering and creative in how we shape the development of the Museum, leading practice in our sector, both nationally and internationally. How we work in partnership and in being experimental and receptive to new forms of co-creation with all our audiences and users underpins our approach.
What we were aiming for

‘a transformational interpretation strategy that engaged visitors more and an activity plan that enabled us to work with new audiences and communities who were not using the Museum currently’

• Co-developed through consultation with target audiences, academics and curators
• Focus on people and experiences, animals and relevance to diverse audiences
• New learning and people spaces
Our Country Lives

• £3m + capital and activity project to redevelop the Museum
• Funded by HLF, DCMS Wolfson, Headley Trust and Wellcome Trust plus donors and smaller trusts and funds
• Renewal and creation of total of 10 new galleries, public and learning spaces + Activity Plan to develop new audiences
Timeline

- Submitted the project enquiry form in June 2011
- Round 1 application submitted August 2012
- Started Round 2 January 2013
- Round 2 application submitted Feb 2014 and
- Delivery commenced October 2014
- Reopening October 2016
- Activity Plan completed April 2018
A Year on the Farm
Its history and significance for those of us who work in the sector is great museum projects of the last century.
WORKING WOOD

Woodland provides an important source of energy and materials. Some crafts rely on freshly cut ‘green’ wood and others require wood that has been left to harden. Different trees provide timber suited to particular uses.

With tools to measure, cut and shape wood, craftspople can make everything from spoons to rakes. For some tasks, such as charcoal burning, people lived in the woods as they worked.
Activity Plan

Target audiences:

- **People from local urban Reading communities** (representative of borough demographics, all age groups, mixed age groups and families)
- **People with a direct experience of the countryside** (resident in rural communities, family history of living in rural community, currently working in rural employment, history of working in agriculture)
- **People with a specialist interest** (in MERL’s collections, in the themes and messages of the interpretation, in issues that relate to MERL’s aims and policy)
- **Adult learners, researchers and browsers**, including young people (18-24) and hospital visitors
- **Secondary school-aged children and young people**
Audience Development:

Engagement and Participation

- Communicating - strategy for social media, particularly blog and twitter
- Rebranding and redevelopment of web presence
- Outreach – agricultural shows, community events
  - ‘Shut but not shutting up’
- Panels and working with community groups – feeding into design and programme planning
- Co-developing display content and exploring new models for regular engagement – place for engaging with ‘global’ relevance and themes – place, identity, food and sustainable societies and communities
- Volunteering – growing capacity and diversity
Community consultation

- Initial small-scale consultation, ramped up between Round 1 & 2
- During Round 2 consultation - Large-scale events, limited number of focus groups
- Deployed model of a ladder of engagement that moved groups from basic awareness through to co-creation
- Decided early on to exploit our strengths in volunteering to engage audiences more than forms of audience development
Evaluation: OCL

- Planned outcomes for heritage, people and communities all met (642 heritage activities; 19,908 people participated; 145 volunteers involved in delivery of Plan, of which 25% diverse ethnic and low participation backgrounds)
- New ways of engaging communities with collections achieved – visitor levels, dwell times and quality of engagement all increasing
- Changed our working culture through the focus on team-based approach to development and delivery
- Evidence that audience perceptions of the
“Very informative. More than ever it is important to keep our connection with the land, but this is hard to do in modern day life. This museum captures the complexities, challenges and benefits well.”
“Amazing, What a fabulous Museum - it really is impressive. Beautifully curated – so informative and accessible – and a wonderful space. Congratulations! Well worth the heritage funding!”
“First came here in 1971 – what a change! It’s wonderful.” Comment in visitor book from heritage consultant

“Brilliant session. Learned lots of things I didn’t know before. Excellent mixing and matching of activities which suited a wide range of ages” Participant, Children’s book group
“I haven't known anything about rural life heritage. It's a very interesting experience for me. Before MERL, I had only one experience that I went to a farm with my daughter last year”

“I have learned so much from the oral interviews – how things we done in the past and how things have changed” (volunteer)

“Feedback from our families suggested that they could relate the museum displays to the rural life they had back home” (group leader)
Integrated Research & Development
and Berkshire Community Interest
Company Bed

We are using this bed to help members integrate
with other gardening communities, learn new skills
to share gardening knowledge including new
vegetables!

Based on previous gardening experience at the
METAL we are growing a range of seasonal
vegetables & flowers including exotic species.
Next steps?

• 2018-22: Museums Partnership Reading – new Arts Council NPO with Reading Museum developed around common audiences and shared vision

• Building on success of OCL model of co-developed programmes with community groups with focus on
  - ‘social outcomes for people that connect them with their personal histories and identities; improve well-being; and foster a sense of place and appreciation of Reading’s rich cultural heritage.’
• Co-development – focus on programming linked to collections and partnership working
• Building on community engagement work to diversify and extend audiences
• Commissioning and focus on health and well-being outcomes
• Volunteering
• Creative projects – Pete Flood, Jackie Oates, Jack Thacker, Steve Claydon and Maria McKinney
• Digital working and engagement – growth in 2017/18
  – followers from 23,655 to 58,304 (+146%) (twitter now 68K)
  – engagement from 57.3K to 2.13M (+3617%)
  – impressions from 2.16M to 40.6M (+1779%)
Towards 2015

The Museum at the heart of the Reading Cultural landscape. A place that will ‘empower and inspire learning and deepen engagement with today's environment’

- Digital
- Intangible cultural heritage
- New approaches to collecting and recording rural heritage
- Creativity and skills
- Broadening and evolving focus on contemporary environmental sustainability
- New models of engagement and outcomes for
Our Country Lives

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4TNkGeoZ48